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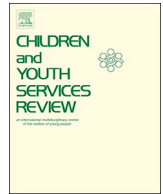
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# Cultural matching factors, child factors and fostering factors associated with successful foster placement: An explorative study into the perspectives of unaccompanied refugee children, their foster carers and guardians

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from the baseline measurement of a longitudinal Dutch study focusing on cultural matching, child and fostering factors associated with the success of foster placements of unaccompanied refugee children. We assessed the placement from the perspectives of the children, their foster carers and their guardians. The children ( $n = 39$ ) and their carers ( $n = 37$ ) were visited at their homes, where they completed several questionnaires (e.g. SDQ, BIC, SLE, RATS, AHIMSA and questionnaires measuring bio/demographic variables, placement success and characteristics of the placement, including cultural characteristics). The guardians ( $n = 37$ ) were asked to complete a digital questionnaire. The success of the placement was analysed using logistic regression models. The quality of the relationship between child and foster carer(s) exhibited an almost one-to-one relationship with 'placement success', for both the child model and the foster carer model. This means that one could also investigate the quality of the relationship between the child and carer to determine placement success. The regression analyses showed that, for children, cultural similarity between a child and their carers was of great importance. However, for foster carers and guardians, cultural similarity was less related to placement success. In addition, a higher score on prosocial behaviour by the child (SDQ self-report) was associated with more positive outcomes regarding placement success (child model). For foster carers, children's externalizing behaviour (SDQ) was negatively correlated with the success of the placement (foster carer model). For guardians, a higher score on the quality of the caregiving environment (BIC-G) was associated with placement success (guardian model). Implications for research and practice are also discussed.

## 1. Introduction

In 2019, 1,046 unaccompanied refugee children (hereafter referred to as children) arrived in the Netherlands and applied for asylum (IND, 2019). These children are seen as a particularly vulnerable subgroup within the broader group of young refugees (Luster, Qin, Bates, Rana, & Lee, 2010; Vervliet, Lammertyn, Broekaert, & Derluyn, 2014), as they have more often experienced traumatic events and losses compared to their peers arriving with parents (Hodes, Jagdev, Chandra, & Cunliff, 2008). Moreover, after arriving in the host country, they have to deal with hardship and insecurity without the support of their parents (Bean, Eurelings-Bontekoe, & Spinhoven, 2007). Immediately after arrival in the Netherlands, those under 18 years of age get assigned a guardian by the Nidos Foundation (i.e. the Dutch guardianship organization for unaccompanied refugee children). A guardian ensures proper exercise of the care provided to the child, and intervenes if this care is not

sufficient (Spinder & Van Hout, 2008, p. 26). The guardian is also the direct mentor of the child and its foster family, and meets both parties on a regular base (i.e., at least once every four weeks; Spinder, Van Hout, & Hesser, 2010).

Depending on their age, asylum status, needs and vulnerability, children are placed in different forms of care (Zijlstra et al., 2017). All children under 15 years of age are placed in foster families (Nidos, 2017), which takes the form of either *traditional foster care* (families who are not known to the child) or *kinship care* (family members or extended network) (De Ruijter de Wildt et al., 2015). In 2018, almost one third (1,298) of the children under the guardianship of Nidos lived in foster families (Nidos, 2018). Nidos prefers to place children in families which are known to the child, or are connected with or have a close association with the child's cultural background (De Ruijter de Wildt et al., 2015; Spinder, Van Hout, & Hesser, 2010). Older children are placed in small and large reception facilities.

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Previous Dutch research (Kalverboer et al., 2017) comparing different forms of care (i.e. foster families, small living units, children's living groups and campuses) for unaccompanied refugee children found that children in foster care are most positive about their daily life, have more Dutch friends, and are most positive about their place in Dutch society. Other studies (e.g. Bean, Eurelings-Bontekoe, & Spinhoven, 2007; Hodes et al., 2008; Mitra & Hodes, 2019; Ni Raghallaigh, 2013; Zijlstra et al., 2019) have also emphasized the importance of highly supportive living arrangements such as foster care for the well-being of unaccompanied children. Recently, there has been interest in unaccompanied refugee children in foster care (see e.g. Crea, Lopez, Taylor, & Underwood, 2017; Rogers, Carr, & Hickman, 2018; Sirriyeh & Ni Raghallaigh, 2018; Van Holen, Trogh, West, Meys, & Vanderfaille, 2019; Wade, 2019). However, empirical research on those in 'cultural foster care'<sup>1</sup> is lacking, even though there are major differences for unaccompanied refugee children between cultural foster placements and cross-cultural foster placements: both types have specific strengths and challenges (Van Holen et al., 2019). Moreover, to date, there has been no overview of the factors associated with successful foster placements for unaccompanied refugee children which takes into account the perspectives of children, their foster carers and their guardians. The results of our study might provide insight into possible improvements in the process of matching – a process of choosing which available foster family is the best fit for a foster child, according to certain criteria (Strijker & Zandberg, 2001) – as these matching criteria may be in need of adjustment based on factors associated with positive placement outcomes. After all, '... a good match between the foster child and foster parents increases the likelihood of a successful foster placement, and reduces the risk of a breakdown' (De Maeyer, 2016, p. 2).

In the following paragraph, we present the literature on factors associated with successful foster placement of (unaccompanied refugee) children.

## 2. Factors associated with successful foster placements of unaccompanied refugee children

The factors associated with successful foster placements can be categorized into *child factors* and *fostering factors* (see Fig. 1). As *cultural matching factors* are the key (fostering) factors in this study, they are presented as a separate category. Each of these factors appears in a numbered list in our exploratory conceptual model, which structures our discussion of the literature below. The conceptual model was based on the outcomes of an extensive literature review, which was built upon research across multiple cultural contexts. The outcomes of that review were discussed with all authors, including the way of clustering the factors that were identified.

**Cultural matching factors.** Wade, Sirriyeh, Kohli, and Simmonds (2012, p. 76) outlined the difficulty of determining what encompasses a 'cultural match'. Social workers in their study mentioned that matching on the basis of cultural similarities entails looking at similarities between children and foster carers in terms of country of origin, religion and language. Cultural similarity is beneficial for the child's functioning, according to foster carers (Brown, George, Sintzel, & St. Arnault, 2009). Children themselves were more divided on the degree of cultural similarity needed (Barrie & Mendes, 2011; Hek, 2007; Kidane, 2001; Rip, Zijlstra, Post, Kalverboer, & Knorth, 2020; Stanley, 2001; Yaya, 1996) (1). Moreover, cultural matching is often implicit in kinship care (Brown, George, et al., 2009). Continuity of family

identity, but also a continued life within the ethnic and religious community of origin, are some advantages of kinship care (Hegar, 1999). Studies that have compared kinship care and traditional foster care were inconclusive. One study (e.g. Tarren-Sweeney & Hazell, 2006) found reduced externalizing and total problems (on the CBCL) for those children living in kinship care, whereas other studies (e.g. Holtan, Rønning, Handegård, & Sourander, 2005; Keller et al., 2001) found no differences in behavioral problems between those in kinship care and those in traditional foster care when controlling for other variables, such as the child's gender and race, and his/her placement outside the local community (2). Furthermore, a review study focusing on acculturation<sup>2</sup> differences between immigrant children and their parents concluded that acculturation gaps can lead to various outcomes with regard to family functioning and youth adjustment' (Telzer, 2010). For children staying with 'cultural foster families' whose cultural background does not fully align with the child's cultural background (e.g. child and carers are from the same country of origin, have the same native language, but have a different religion), acculturation can become more complex, as it then involves the child's own culture, the host family's culture and the culture of the host country (3).

**Child factors.** Wade et al. (2012, p. 119) found no association between age and gender of unaccompanied refugee children, and the quality of family relationships. Crea et al. (2017), however, found that unaccompanied girls were more likely to experience placement change than boys, when controlling for factors such as age, fear of returning to the home country and having experienced violence in the home country (4). Studies focusing on the relationship between time in the host country and the well-being of the child have also presented contrasting results. Bean, Eurelings-Bontekoe and Spinhoven (2007) found no or little association between time in the host country and the well-being of the child. However, Beiser, Puente-Duran and Hou (2015), who compared emotional problems among children with greater and lesser cultural distance to the host country, found that emotional problems declined over time for children with a small cultural distance to the host country, and increased for those with a large cultural distance to the host country (5). Moreover, the stress related to the asylum procedure and the uncertainty attached to it has an influence on the relationship between children and their foster carers (Horgan & Ni Raghallaigh, 2019). The denial of a residence permit has been found to be associated with higher levels of psychological distress (Jakobsen, DeMott, Wentzel-Larsen, & Heir, 2017) (6). Maintaining foster children's contact with birth families is also considered important (Schofield & Stevenson, 2009, as cited in Ni Raghallaigh, 2013), although this often comes with challenges for refugee children, as locating the birth family might be difficult (in some cases birth family members have died) or contact with the birth family might put the child or family at risk (Ni Raghallaigh, 2013) (7). Past placement movements have also been associated with unsuccessful placements (Wade et al., 2012, p. 80) (8). Children who have emotional or behavioural problems have been found to be less integrated into the foster family (Wade et al., 2012), which consequently leads to less successful placements. Experiencing more traumatic events before arrival in the host country – in the country of origin or during flight – appears to be strongly associated with post-traumatic stress symptoms (Bean, Eurelings-Bontekoe, Derluyn, & Spinhoven, 2004a; Bronstein, Montgomery, & Dobrowolski, 2012) and negatively associated with the success of the foster placement (Linowitz & Boothby, 1988) (9, 10, 11). In addition, the acculturation strategy (integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization) of the child appears to be associated with the child's well-being, whereby integration has been found to be most associated with a positive outcome and marginalization the least (Berry, 1997; Berry & Sam, 1997; Berry,

<sup>1</sup> In the Netherlands, 'cultural foster care' or a 'cultural placement' refers to a foster care placement in which the child and the foster carers have a similar cultural background (see also Rip et al., 2020); in other studies the opposite of a 'cultural placement' is referred to as a 'transcultural- or cross-cultural placement' (see for example: Brown, St. Arnault, et al., 2009; Coakley & Gruber, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Acculturation is 'the process in which immigrant individuals adapt to a new culture, and their beliefs, values, and behaviors may change as a result of this contact' (Berry, 2006, as cited in Telzer, 2010, p. 313).

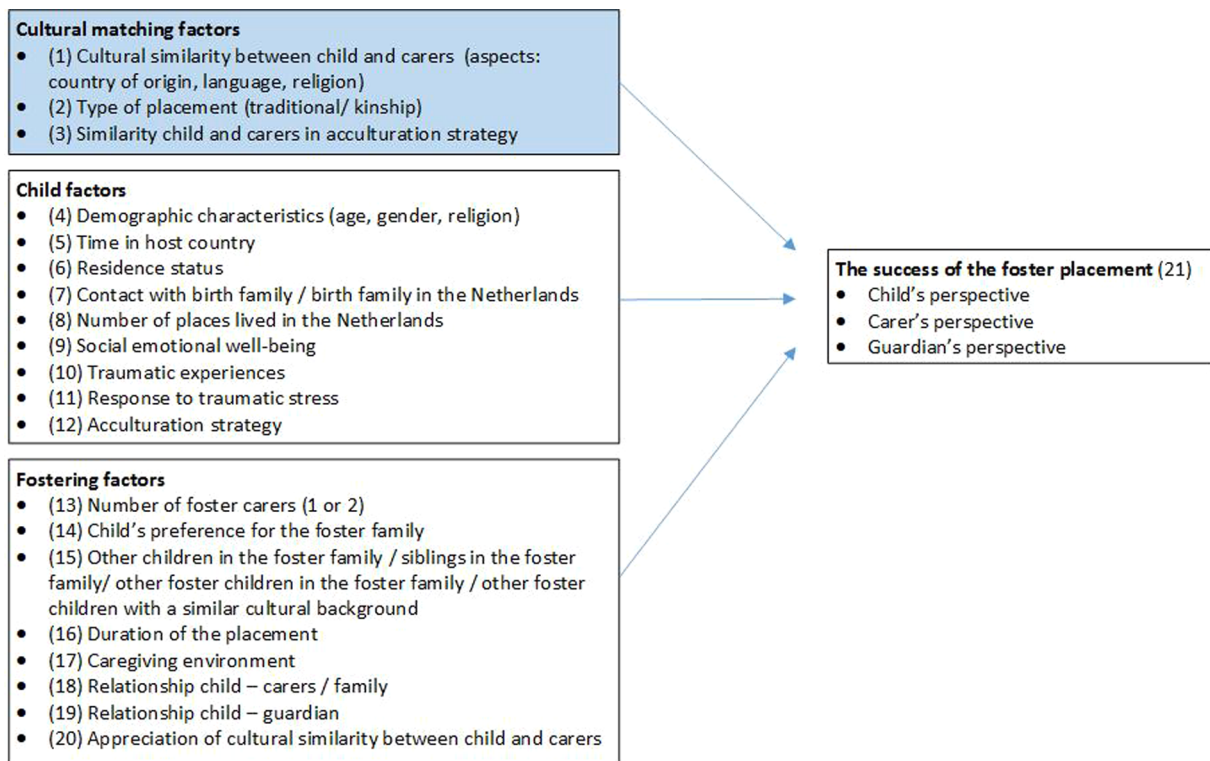


Fig. 1. Exploratory conceptual model of factors associated with successful foster placements.

Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006) (12).

**Fostering factors.** Aspects that appear to be considered when matching a child to a foster family include the composition of the foster family (one or two foster carers) and the views of the child (child's preference for the foster family) (Ni Raghallaigh, 2013) (13, 14). In addition, the foster carers' birth children and other foster children have been found to play a significant role in the transition into the foster family (Ni Raghallaigh, 2013). Rivalry between the birth children of foster carers and the unaccompanied child has been found to be negatively associated with the success of the placement (Bates et al., 2005; Brown & Bednar, 2006). Some children have reported that living with other children from their own cultural background was helpful (Kidane, 2001b, as cited in Hek, 2007) (15). Furthermore, there have been contrasting findings in relation to the duration of the placement. For example, in one study, the longer the child stayed in the foster family, the more integrated into the foster family the child felt, and the confidence of the child and communication between the child and the family grew over time (Wade et al., 2012, p. 290). In contrast, Linowitz and Boothby (1988) found that as time elapses more friction occurs within the family (16). In addition, it has also been found that when a minor is in an inadequate caregiving environment for a long time, this often leads to developmental problems (Rutter, Silberg, O'Conner, & Simonoff, 1999, as cited in Zijlstra, 2012) (17). A relationship between the child and their foster carers which changes and develops over time (Linowitz & Boothby, 1988) appears to be important for placement success. According to children, their carers' display of love and care was important, as well as their availability. Similarly, carers highlighted the significance of their caring and nurturing roles (Wade et al., 2012) (18). In addition, when the children's contact with their guardian was rated helpful, this was associated with them doing well in domains such as health, educational progress, self-confidence, emotional ties, and emotional and behavioural difficulties (Wade et al., 2012, p. 260) (19). Finally, the child's or carer's appreciation of cultural similarity might influence placement success, depending on whether the child is placed in a cultural foster placement or not (see subsection on 'cultural matching factors') (20).

In this exploratory study, a foster placement is regarded as successful when the child, foster carers and guardian are all satisfied with the foster placement (Rip et al., 2020; see also Sinclair & Wilson, 2003) (21).

This paper presents findings from a Dutch study focusing on factors associated with successful foster placement of unaccompanied refugee children, in which we assess the circumstances from the perspectives of the children, their foster carers and guardians. This exploratory study is guided by the following research questions: What are the results regarding placement success and the possible factors contributing to placement success? To what extent are cultural matching factors associated with the success of foster placement of unaccompanied refugee children? To what extent are other factors associated with the success of foster placement of unaccompanied refugee children?

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Design

In this ongoing longitudinal observational study consisting of three measurements, data have been collected from unaccompanied refugee children, their foster carers and their guardians. This article addresses the findings of the *baseline measurement*. Data for this measurement were collected between November 2018 and January 2019. Approval for the study was provided by the Ethics Committee of the University of Groningen, Department of Pedagogy and Educational Sciences.

#### 3.2. Participants

##### 3.2.1. Inclusion criteria and selection procedure

Children between 10 and 16 years of age were included. The children had been living with their foster families for at least three months and up to two years. The children were not born in the Netherlands and were not living with foster carers who had raised them in the country of origin. None of the children had participated in our former study (Rip et al., 2020), and only one child per foster family was included. Foster



carers and guardians were selected based on the participating children.

In total, 405 children ( $n = 275$  kinship foster care;  $n = 130$  traditional foster care) in the Nidos database matched the inclusion criteria. Two of the above-mentioned inclusion criteria (i.e. only one foster child per family; not living with foster carers who previously raised the child) could only be assessed in consultation with the guardian, child and foster carers. Guardians were requested to discuss participation with 'their' child and its foster family, also when more than one child was living in the foster family. In the latter case the guardian, in consultation with the children, decided which of the children would participate in our study. For more than half of the children ( $n = 221$ ) reasons for exclusion were mentioned: the child (and carers) was (were) not willing to participate ( $n = 35$ ); the child did not live in the foster family anymore ( $n = 51$ ); the child did not meet the inclusion criteria ( $n = 77$ ); reasons related to the child according to the guardian (e.g. the child is too vulnerable, has too much on its mind, has a physical or mental disability or the placement is not going well;  $n = 54$ ); and in some situations reasons for exclusion stayed unclear due to the unavailability of an interpreter or as the guardian was too busy to discuss participation with the child and its foster family ( $n = 4$ ). For 140 children no reasons for exclusion were mentioned, mostly because guardians did not respond to our request ( $n = 109$ ). Additionally, three children participated, while they did not meet the criteria (i.e. they were previously raised by their foster carers). So they had to be removed from the sample. One child and its foster family indicated that they did not want to participate anymore when the researchers arrived at their home. Moreover, one child participated but unfortunately this data was not correctly saved. All of this resulted in a sample of 39 children.

### 3.2.2. Characteristics of the sample

The unaccompanied refugee children ( $n = 39$ ) came from 15 countries of origin, with most from Eritrea and Syria (see Table 1). The mean age of the children was 14.74 ( $SD = 1.6$ ). Overall, most of the children were either Christian (46%) or Muslim (44%), lived in a traditional foster placement (62%), and were looked after by one foster carer (64%). On average, the children had been living with their foster families for about 14 months ( $SD = 7.44$ ).

Most of the foster carers ( $n = 37$ ) and guardians ( $n = 37$ ) of the children participated in our study. However, two foster carers and two guardians did not participate in the research, without providing a reason. We only used the data of one of the foster carers (i.e. the foster carer who provided most of the information), as both foster carers participated in only three cases. Most of the guardians were female (81%) and came from the Netherlands (72%).

**Table 1**  
Sample characteristics of the participating children, foster carers and guardians.

		Unaccompanied refugee child ( $n = 39$ ) n (%)	Foster carer ( $n = 37$ ) n (%)	Guardian ( $n = 37$ ) n (%)
Gender	Male	24 (62%)	9 (24%)	7 (19%)
	Female	15 (39%)	28 (76%)	30 (81%)
Country of origin	Eritrea	15 (39%)	5 (14%)	3 (8%)
	Syria	6 (15%)	6 (16%)	
	Afghanistan	3 (8%)	2 (5%)	
	Somalia	2 (5%)	10 (27%)	
	The Netherlands		4 (11%)	28 (76%)
	Other	15 (38%)	10 (27%)	6 (16%)
Religion	Christianity	18 (46%)	13 (35%)	
	Islam	17 (44%)	20 (54%)	
	Other	3 (8%)	2 (5%)	
	No religion	1 (3%)	2 (5%)	

Note. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

### 3.3. Measures

This section presents the questionnaires used in this study; who completed each type of questionnaire (i.e. child, foster carer, guardian); and to which factor they refer (relevant factor numbers are cited for each subsection, see Fig. 1). All of the questionnaires for the children and foster carers were available in Dutch, English, Tigrinya and Arabic. Qualified translators made two translations and two back-translations (see Guillemin, Bombardier, & Beaton, 1993). Subsequently, two researchers determined the best translation. After all of the translations were uploaded to a digital questionnaire system (i.e. Qualtrics), the final Arabic input was checked for accuracy by an Arabic-speaking volunteer, and the same was done for the Tigrinya input, as the researchers were only able to check the Dutch and English input. Additionally, several questionnaires (SLE, RATS, SDQ) were available in multiple languages other than Dutch, English, Tigrinya or Arabic.

#### 3.3.1. Successful placements (child, foster carer, guardian) (21)

All of the participants were asked to what extent they were satisfied with the foster placement using one item rated on a 11-point Likert scale. The highest score (10), which indicated that the participant could not be more satisfied with the foster placement, was accompanied by a positive smiley face, while the lowest score (0) was accompanied by a negative smiley face. After scoring placement success, participants were asked to explain *why* they gave this score.

#### 3.3.2. Demographic and placement information (child, foster carer, guardian) (2, 4–8, 13–16, 18, 19)

Participants were asked several questions related to topics such as gender (0 = female, 1 = male), date of birth, country of origin, native language, religion, time in host country (in months), residence status (1 = valid residence permit, 2 = residence permit in process, 3 = no residence permit), and family reunification procedure (no = 0, yes = 1). Moreover, they were asked about the placement of the child in the foster family (e.g. duration of the placement; type of placement [0 = traditional; 1 = kinship<sup>3</sup>]; the composition of the foster family [other children in the foster family/siblings/other foster children, for all no = 0, yes = 1; the number of foster carers, one carer = 0, two carers = 1]; the relationship between child and foster carers [score between 0 and 10]); contact with biological family (no = 0, yes = 1); or biological family in the Netherlands (no = 0, yes = 1); previous placements (= number); the relationship with the guardian (score between 0 and 10); and the child's preference for the foster family (no or does not matter = 0; yes = 1).

Cultural similarity between child and foster carers was measured by the total score of the average cultural similarity between child and carers on the aspects of country of origin, native language and religion (range: 0–3). For example, if one foster carer had a similar country of origin to the child while the other carer did not, the average score on similarity in country of origin with carers was 0.5. To calculate this score, we used data from both foster carers. A total score for 'cultural similarity' was only created if all aspects contributing to the total score were known (i.e. country of origin, language, religion).

#### 3.3.3. AHIMSA (child, foster carer) (3, 12)

The Acculturation, Habits, and Interests Multicultural Scale for Adolescents (AHIMSA) is an 8-item questionnaire measuring acculturation among adolescents and is suitable for conducting research with multi-ethnic samples (Unger et al., 2002). For example, one item of the AHIMSA is: 'I am most comfortable being with people from ...'. The answer categories are: (1) the Netherlands (indicating assimilation), (2) the country my family is from (indicating separation), (3)

<sup>3</sup> Kinship placement includes placement with relatives of the child who were not known to the child in the country of origin.

both countries (i.e. the Netherlands and the country my family is from; indicating integration) and (4) neither country (indicating marginalization). The predominant response of each participant was identified (i.e. assimilation, separation, integration, marginalization, or a diffuse profile with two predominant responses). Participants could decide on which country they would complete the questionnaire, as several participants had not lived with their birth family for a long period of time. The internal construct validity was moderate to good (assimilation subscale 0.79; separation subscale 0.68; integration subscale 0.79; marginalization subscale 0.50). The external validity was checked with correlations between the different subscales of the AHIMSA and the ARSMA-II, another acculturation measure (i.e. 0.47 assimilation; 0.33 separation; 0.43 integration). The AHIMSA marginalization scale correlated inversely with the ARSMA-II assimilation scale ( $-0.17$ ) (Unger et al., 2002). Although 'originally developed and validated with pre-adolescent samples, it has been used with adult participants and found to be psychometrically sound' (Toro & Nieri, 2018, p. 5). The AHIMSA was not completed by foster carers whose country of origin was the Netherlands ( $n = 4$ ).

Similarity between child and foster carer in relation to the predominant acculturation strategy was also assessed. If participants had two predominant strategies, similarity in acculturation strategy was identified if the child and carer had at least one predominant strategy in common.

### 3.3.4. SLE and RATS (child) (10, 11)

The Stressful Life Events (SLE) checklist consists of 12 dichotomous (yes/no) questions about possible life events that the child might have experienced, for example related to physical and sexual maltreatment, experiences with illness, accidents and disasters, or stressful life events concerning the family. Children could also add a stressful life event which was not listed, leading to a maximum score of 13. The higher the score, the more stressful life events the child has experienced (Bean et al., 2004a). Five independent studies that were conducted to replicate the results of studies on stressful life events have confirmed the reliability of the SLE (Bean et al., 2004a).

The Reactions of Adolescents to Traumatic Stress (RATS) questionnaire measures the severity of responses to traumatic experiences. The questionnaire consists of 22 items and has four response categories: 'not at all' (1), 'a little' (2), 'much' (3) and 'very much' (4). It provides a score on three types of reactions: intrusion, avoidance or hyperarousal. The total score (sum of three subscores) ranges from 22 to 88 (Bean, Eurelings-Bontekoe, Derluyn, & Spinhoven, 2004b). The total scale and subscales of the RATS show good internal consistency and good validity (content, construct and criterion, see Bean, Derluyn, Eurelings-Bontekoe, Broekaert, & Spinhoven, 2006). For this study, we used the total scores for the SLE and RATS.

### 3.3.5. SDQ (child, foster carer, guardian) (9)

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; see [www.sdqinfo.org](http://www.sdqinfo.org)) is a 25-item questionnaire assessing the social-emotional well-being of children and adolescents and its influence on their daily life. The questionnaire has three response categories: 'not true', 'somewhat true', and 'certainly true'. The questionnaire has five subscales (emotional problems, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems and prosocial behaviour), each consisting of five items. A 'total difficulties score' (0–40) is generated by adding up all the subscale scores with the exception of prosocial behaviour (Goodman & Goodman, 2009). An internalizing behaviour score is generated by adding up the subscale scores for emotional problems and peer problems. The externalizing behaviour score is the sum of the subscale scores for conduct problems and hyperactivity. The SDQ was completed

by all participants, with the children using the self-report version, and the foster carers and guardians using the parent version. The validity and reliability of the SDQ is satisfactory (Goodman, 1997; Goodman, Meltzer, & Bailey, 1998). For this study, we used the total score as well as the subscales and the internalizing and externalizing behaviour scores.

### 3.3.6. BIC (child, foster carer, guardian) (17)

The Best Interest of the Child (BIC) questionnaire measures the quality of the caregiving environment and is based on the Best Interest of the Child model. This model defines 14 conditions for a healthy development that are related to the family setting (condition 1–7) and society (condition 8–14): (1) adequate physical care, (2) safe direct physical environment, (3) affective atmosphere, (4) supportive, flexible child-rearing structure, (5) adequate examples by parents or caretakers, (6) interest, (7) continuity in upbringing conditions, (8) safe wider physical environment, (9) respect, (10) social network, (11) education, (12) contact with peers, (13) adequate examples in society, and (14) stability in life circumstances (Kalverboer & Zijlstra, 2006; Zijlstra, 2012). The answer categories in the BIC questionnaire are: unsatisfactory (0), moderate (1), satisfactory (2), and good (3). Adding up the scores of the 14 conditions, a total score ranging from 0 to 42 can be generated. The higher the total score, the higher the quality of the caregiving environment. The BIC was completed by all participants, with the children using the self-report version (BIC-S; Ten Brummelaar et al., 2018); the foster carers using the version for parents (BIC-P); and the guardians using a slightly adjusted parental version (BIC-G).

The validity of the BIC-Q (version for professionals) – the basis for the development of all BIC instruments – has been examined, with the results exhibiting good construct validity (Zevulun, 2017; Zijlstra, 2012) and good reliability (Zijlstra, 2012). The construct validity and reliability of the BIC-S have also been examined, showing a moderate scale ( $H = 0.40$ ;  $Rho = 0.86$ ) for 11 of the 14 conditions (Ten Brummelaar et al., 2018). The reliability and validity of the BIC-P and BIC-G have not yet been examined.

### 3.3.7. Cultural questionnaire (child and foster carers) (20)

Using the Cultural Questionnaire, children and foster carers were asked to what extent they value cultural similarity with regard to country of origin, native language and religion, answering on a 11-point Likert scale for each aspect. After rating, children and foster carers were asked to explain *why* they appreciated 'cultural similarity' (or did not).

## 3.4. Procedure

After a positive response to the invitation to participate by the children and foster carers, the guardian provided us with their contact details. Child and carers were then contacted directly to inform them about the research and make an appointment.

The children and their foster carers were visited at their home by two researchers. Before starting the data collection, children and carers were asked for their *informed consent*. We made clear that the results of the study would be processed anonymously and that stories shared by the children would not be shared with their foster carers or social workers, and vice versa, except when the child was in danger. In agreement with children and foster carers, the interviews were held in separate rooms, so that both parties were able to talk freely.

The participants filled out the questionnaires using a tablet, in the presence of one of 11 trained research assistants. If the participant preferred the researcher to read the questions aloud, the responses were summarized and checked for accuracy with the participant. The use of

**Table 2**  
Descriptives for cultural matchings factors.

Factors	Variable	n (%) / M (SD)
Cultural similarity between child and carers	Cultural similarity between child and foster carers (0–3) (n = 35)	1.64 (1.19)
	Similarity in country of origin with foster carer 1 (n = 39)	19 (49%)
	Similarity in country of origin with foster carer 2 (n = 14)	8 (57%)
	Similarity in native language with foster carer 1 (n = 35)	14 (40%)
	Similarity in native language with foster carer 2 (n = 12)	6 (50%)
	Similarity in religion with foster carer 1 (n = 37)	27 (73%)
	Similarity in religion with foster carer 2 (n = 14)	11 (79%)
Type of placement	Traditional foster care	24 (62%)
	Kinship placements	15 (39%)
Similarity in acculturation strategy	Similarity in predominant acculturation strategy with foster carer (measured with AHIMSA) (n = 33)	13 (39%)

Note. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

telephone interpreters from the Netherlands Interpreting and Translation Centre (TVcN) was offered to participants. Several children (n = 16) and foster carers (n = 8) made use of this. Several others made use of the English, Tigrinya or Arabic translations of the questionnaires (n = 8 children; n = 8 foster carers) or were able to fill out the questionnaires in Dutch. Completing the questionnaires took approximately 2 h (children) and 1.5 h (foster carers). To thank participants for their participation, children received a gift card and foster carers some chocolate. All researchers signed a confidentiality agreement.

After the child and foster carers completed the questionnaires, the guardian was approached by email and asked to complete a 30-minute digital questionnaire.

### 3.5. Data analysis

First, descriptive statistics on the cultural matching factors (i.e. cultural similarity between child and foster carers, type of placement, [similarity in] predominant acculturation strategy), child factors (SLE, RATS, SDQ), fostering factors (BIC, relationship between child and foster carer; relationship between child and guardian; appreciation of cultural similarity) and the outcome variable of placement success are presented.

The original score for placement success (i.e. a rating score between 0 and 10) showed skewed distributions for each perspective (child, carer and guardian) (see [Appendix A](#) for histograms of placement success), and the assumptions of linear regression models appeared to be violated. Therefore, placement success was dichotomized for each perspective. In order to have both groups as large as possible, the placement outcomes of children and foster carers were dichotomized into ‘the most successful placements’ (placements rated 10) and ‘other placements’ (rated 0–9), while placement outcomes of guardians were dichotomized into ‘the most successful placements’ (rated 9 or 10) or ‘other placements’ (rated 0–8).

Bivariate analyses between each separate factor and placement success were performed using independent sample t-tests and chi-squared tests to determine which factors were potentially associated with placement success (dichotomized outcome variables). Only the independent variables that were related to the particular perspective were examined in the analyses. For example, in the analyses of placement success from the perspective of the child, we only examined social-emotional well-being from the perspective of the child (SDQ self-report) and not from the perspective of the foster carer or guardian.

Subsequently, we performed logistic regression with the independent variables that were found to be significantly related ( $p < .10$ ) in the bivariate analyses. Because of the explorative nature of the study, and the small sample size, we did not want to miss promising potential predictors in our final model. Therefore, we used a more relaxed significance level of 10% instead of the more common

5%. This is in line with the study of [Van Hoven, Blijckers, Trogh, West, and Vanderfaeillie \(2020\)](#). Several variables (*child factors*: residence permit of child, contact with biological family of the child, acculturation strategy of the child; *fostering factors*: living with biological children of foster family, living with biological brothers or sisters in foster family, living with other foster children in foster family, living with foster children from a similar country of origin) were not included in the bivariate analyses, as the subgroups were too small (less than five).

Due to the explorative nature of our study, we first conducted the analyses using backward logistic regression to explore the influence of the factors on the likelihood of placement success from the perspective of the child, foster carer and guardian. Thereafter, we extended the logistic regression models by adding a cultural matching factor to each model (1. cultural similarity between child and foster carers, 2. traditional foster placement or kinship placement, 3. similarity in acculturation strategy). The selection of the final models was based on the significance of individual variables, the percentage correctly classified, the odds ratios and confidence intervals. This resulted in a final model for each perspective: a child model, a foster carer model and a guardian model. Multicollinearity was checked by inspecting the relationships between the predictors in the final models.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Descriptive results

#### 4.1.1. Placement success

Foster carers were most positive about the success of the foster placement (M = 9.32, SD = 1.16, range: 5–10), followed by the children (M = 8.64, SD = 2.42, range: 0–10), and then the guardians (M = 8.27, SD = 1.37, range: 4–10). A large number of children (n = 21) and carers (n = 24) gave the placement a score of 10. Five guardians gave the placement a score of 10, and 13 guardians gave the placement a score of nine (see also [Appendix A](#)).

#### 4.1.2. Cultural matching factors

[Table 2](#) shows the extent to which the children and foster carers

**Table 3**  
Descriptives for predominant acculturation strategies of children and carers.

Variable	Child (n = 39) n (%)	Foster carer (n = 33) n (%)
Assimilation	5 (13%)	2 (6%)
Separation	10 (26%)	8 (24%)
Integration	16 (41%)	19 (58%)
Marginalization	3 (8%)	2 (6%)
Diffuse profile	5 (13%)	2 (6%)

Note. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

**Table 4**  
Descriptive statistics for the appreciation of cultural similarity.

Variable	Country of origin M (SD)	Native language M (SD)	Religion M (SD)
Children ( <i>n</i> = 39)	5.97 (4.27)	6.15 (4.36)	6.85 (4.06)
Foster carers ( <i>n</i> = 37)	4.62 (4.42)	5.68 (4.02)	4.32 (4.52)

Note. 0 = respondent does not appreciate cultural similarity at all; 10 = respondent very much appreciates cultural similarity. All ranges varied from 0 to 10.

have a culturally similar background in terms of country of origin, native language and religion. In our sample, children and foster carers showed the highest cultural similarity with regard to religion (foster carer 1 = 73%; foster carer 2 = 79%). The mean score for cultural similarity between the children and foster carers was 1.64 (SD = 1.19), which indicates that most children had at least a similar country of origin, native language or religion as their carers (*n* = 35, 4 missing). Most of the children lived in traditional foster placements (62%) and about one third of the children in our sample had a similar predominant acculturation strategy as their carers.

Table 3 offers insight into the predominant acculturation strategies of children and foster carers. Most children and foster carers selected integration as their predominant strategy, followed by separation.

Children valued cultural similarity with regard to country of origin, native language and religion more than did their foster carers (see Table 4). The mean scores of children and foster carers reflect a modest appreciation of cultural similarity. The children valued similarity in religion most (*M* = 6.85; *SD* = 4.06) while the carers predominantly valued having a shared native language (*M* = 5.68; *SD* = 4.02).

#### 4.1.3. Child factors

The average number of stressful life events (SLE) that the children in our sample experienced lies close to the average number experienced by unaccompanied refugee children as reported in previous studies (6.5, Bean et al., 2004a). However, the impact of these stressful life events on the child's mental health (RATS; *M* = 42.54; *SD* = 14.79) was less severe than in the unaccompanied children classification group in another study by Bean et al. (2004b); *M* = 49.2; *SD* = 11.7) and classified as 'average level' (Bean et al., 2004b). The high standard deviations and wide ranges of the RATS outcomes revealed that some children had very severe stress reactions while others did not. It is worthy of note that the children reported having more social-emotional problems (SDQ; *M* = 9.79; *SD* = 5.81) than the foster carers

**Table 5**  
Descriptives for scores on child factors and fostering factors, per perspective.

Factors	Variable	Child ( <i>n</i> = 39) M (SD) Range	Foster carer ( <i>n</i> = 37) M (SD) Range	Guardian ( <i>n</i> = 37) M (SD) Range
Child factors	Traumatic experiences of the child (SLE)	6.08 (3.23) 0–11		
	Response to traumatic experiences (RATS)	42.54 (14.79) 22–71		
	Strengths and difficulties of the child (SDQ)	9.79 (5.81) 1–25	7.38 (6.20) 0–27	7.70 (6.45) 0–27
	Quality of the caregiving environment (BIC)	36.54 (7.32) 6–42	39.41 (2.77) 33–42	35.49 (5.26) 23–42
Fostering factors	Relationship child and foster carer	9.16 (1.97) 0–10	8.76 (1.53) 4–10	
	Relationship child and guardian	8.90 (2.06) 0–10		7.62 (0.72) 6–9

(*M* = 7.38; *SD* = 6.2) and guardians (*M* = 7.70; *SD* = 6.45) were aware of based on what they reported about the child (see Table 5).

#### 4.1.4. Fostering factors

Foster carers were most positive about the quality of the caregiving environment that they offered (BIC; *M* = 39.41; *SD* = 2.77). The children (*M* = 36.54; *SD* = 7.32) and guardians (*M* = 35.49; *SD* = 5.26) reported a lower quality of the caregiving environment. Children and foster carers were both positive about their relationship, resulting in a mean score above 8.7 (out of 10). The children were also positive about their relationship with their guardian (8.9). On average, guardians rated their relationship with the child as 7.6 (see Table 5).

#### 4.2. Factors associated with placement success: Bivariate analyses

In our bivariate analyses, we examined the associations between all of the factors shown in our exploratory conceptual model (see Fig. 1) and the outcome variable of placement success, leading to a selection of 'promising variables' for our logistic regression analyses.

Several variables were significantly associated with 'successful foster placements' (for an overview of each perspective, see Table 6). It became clear that in all of the models (child, foster carer, guardian) *child factors* were important predictors of placement success. With regard to *cultural matching factors* and *fostering factors* the 'promising variables' appeared to differ for each perspective. Interestingly, the quality of the relationship between child and foster carer(s) showed an almost one-to-one relationship with 'placement success' for both the *child model* and the *foster carer model*, which means that one could similarly ask about the quality of the relationship between child and carers in order to understand placement success. If we had included this factor in our logistic regression model, the model outcomes would have been completely based on this factor; therefore, we did not include it in our final models. Subsequently, all of the promising variables except 'relationship between child and carers' were tested in the logistic regression analyses.

#### 4.3. Factors associated with placement success: Logistic regression

The outcomes of the final logistic regression models are presented in Table 7. After exploring the influence of the different *cultural matching variables*, we concluded that the factor, 'cultural similarity between child and foster carers', was predominantly of influence in the *child model*. The *foster carer model* and *guardian model* did not improve with the selection of the variables of 'traditional foster placement or kinship placement' or 'similarity in acculturation strategy'. For reasons of consistency, we included 'cultural similarity between child and foster carers' as a cultural matching factor in all our models. All of the final models included the variable of 'cultural similarity between child and foster carers' and one other variable.

The final *child model*, which correctly classified 85.7 percent of cases, included 'cultural similarity child and foster carers' and 'prosocial behaviour'. The strongest predictor of placement success was 'cultural similarity between child and foster carers' (OR = 2.7). This indicated that if the cultural similarity score increased by one point, the likelihood of placement success for children increased by a factor of 2.7 (90%CI = 1.41–5.15).

The final *foster carer model*, which correctly classified 74.3 percent of cases, included 'cultural similarity child and foster carers' and 'externalizing behaviour', with only 'externalizing behaviour' making a uniquely significant contribution to the model (*p* < .05). A higher score on externalizing behaviour was associated with a significant decrease in the likelihood of placement success (OR = 0.45; 90%CI = 0.27–0.75).

The final *guardian model*, which correctly classified 72.7 percent of cases, included 'cultural similarity child and foster carers' and 'quality of the caregiving environment'. Only the BIC-G made a significant



**Table 6**  
Promising variables per perspective (selection for logistic regression).

Perspective	Factors	Variables	Placement score 0–9 M (SD) or N (%)	Placement score 10 M (SD) or N (%)
CHILD PERSPECTIVE ( <i>n</i> = 39)	Cultural matching factors	Cultural similarity between child and foster carers*** ( <i>n</i> = 35)	0.93 (1.07)	2.12 (1.02)
		Type of placement (kinship)* ( <i>n</i> = 39)	4 (22%)	11 (52%)
		Similarity child and foster carers in acculturation strategy (no similarity)** ( <i>n</i> = 33)	11 (85%)	9 (45%)
	Child factors	SDQ:		
		Conduct Problem Score* ( <i>n</i> = 39)	1.72 (1.41)	0.95 (1.20)
		Prosocial Problem Behaviour*** ( <i>n</i> = 39)	8.50 (1.69)	9.62 (0.74)
	Fostering factors	Response to traumatic stress (RATS)* ( <i>n</i> = 39)	46.94 (14.04)	38.76 (14.68)
		Number of foster carers (2 foster carers)* ( <i>n</i> = 39)	4 (22%)	10 (48%)
		Quality of the caregiving environment* ( <i>n</i> = 39)	34.11 (9.13)	38.62 (4.60)
		Relationship child – foster carers (average of relationship with carer 1 and 2)** ( <i>n</i> = 38)	8.21 (2.66)	9.95 (0.22)
FOSTER CARER PERSPECTIVE ( <i>n</i> = 37)	Child factors	SDQ:	10.77 (7.63)	5.54 (4.45)
		Total score** ( <i>n</i> = 37)		
		Conduct Problem Score** ( <i>n</i> = 37)	1.77 (1.79)	0.29 (0.69)
		Hyperactivity Score*** ( <i>n</i> = 37)	3.77 (2.98)	1.25 (1.51)
	Fostering factors	Prosocial Behaviour*** ( <i>n</i> = 37)	6.92 (1.32)	9.04 (1.27)
		Externalizing behaviour*** ( <i>n</i> = 37)	5.54 (4.41)	1.54 (1.79)
		Relationship child and foster carer*** ( <i>n</i> = 37)	7.69 (1.49)	9.33 (1.23)
Perspective	Factors	Variables	Placement score 0–8 M (SD) or N (%)	Placement score 9–10 M (SD) or N (%)
GUARDIAN PERSPECTIVE ( <i>n</i> = 37)	Cultural matching factors	Type of placement (kinship)** ( <i>n</i> = 37)	4 (21%)	10 (56%)
	Child factors	SDQ:	10.05 (7.16)	5.22 (4.61)
		Total score** ( <i>n</i> = 37)		
		Hyperactivity Score** ( <i>n</i> = 37)	3.42 (2.91)	1.56 (1.79)
		Prosocial Behaviour** ( <i>n</i> = 37)	7.79 (2.22)	9.17 (1.76)
		Internalizing behaviour*** ( <i>n</i> = 37)	5.68 (3.58)	3.44 (2.90)
		Externalizing behaviour** ( <i>n</i> = 37)	4.84 (4.57)	2.06 (2.29)
	Fostering factors	Preference of child for foster family (yes)* ( <i>n</i> = 39)	11 (58%)	15 (83%)
		Quality of the caregiving environment*** ( <i>n</i> = 37)	32.63 (5.26)	38.50 (3.26)
		Relationship child – guardian* ( <i>n</i> = 37)	7.42 (0.77)	7.83 (0.62)

Note. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding. Significant difference: \*  $p < .10$  \*\*  $p < .05$  \*\*\*  $p < .01$ .

contribution to the model ( $p < .01$ ). If the score on the BIC-G increased by one point, the likelihood of placement success increased by 35 percent. All of the final models had residuals less than 2.5.

## 5. Discussion

This study explored which factors contribute to the placement success of unaccompanied refugee children in foster care. The results of the explorative study highlight that the quality of the relationship between child and foster carer(s) exhibited an almost one-to-one

relationship with ‘placement success’. The regression analyses showed that, for children, cultural similarity between a child and their carers was of great importance. However, for foster carers and guardians, cultural similarity was less related to placement success. In addition, a higher score on prosocial behaviour by the child (SDQ self-report) was associated with more positive outcomes regarding placement success (child model). For foster carers, children’s externalizing behaviour (SDQ) was negatively correlated with the success of the placement (foster carer model). For guardians, a higher score on the quality of the caregiving environment (BIC-G) was associated with placement success

**Table 7**  
Logistic regression models predicting the likelihood of placement success (Child Model; Foster Carer Model; Guardian Model).

Predictors	Model 1: Child ( <i>n</i> = 35)					Model 2: Foster carer ( <i>n</i> = 35)					Model 3: Guardian ( <i>n</i> = 33)				
	B	SE	p	OR	[90% CI]	B	SE	p	OR	[90% CI]	B	SE	p	OR	[90% CI]
(Constant)	−9.06	4.91	0.065	0.00		1.95	0.91	0.032	7.03		−11.88	4.25	0.005	0.00	
Cultural similarity between child and foster carers	0.99	0.39	0.011	2.70	[1.41–5.15]	0.76	0.51	0.139	2.13	[0.92–4.95]	0.65	0.40	0.104	1.92	[0.99–3.71]
SDQ-P Prosocial subscale	0.86	0.50	0.088	2.35	[1.03–5.37]										
SDQ-P Externalizing behaviour						−0.80	0.31	0.011	0.45	[0.27–0.75]					
BIC-G											0.30	0.11	0.006	1.35	[1.13–1.62]

Note. OR = Odds Ratio. CI = Confidence interval. Variables: Cultural similarity between child and foster carers: total score between 0 and 3 (sum of similarity in country of origin, language and religion). SDQ-P Prosocial Subscale: Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire for foster carers, prosocial subscale. BIC-G: Best Interest of the Child questionnaire from the perspective of the Guardian. Percentage correctly classified: 85.7 (Model 1), 74.3 (Model 2), 72.7 (Model 3). Nagelkerke R Square: 0.440 (Model 1), 0.526 (Model 2), 0.469 (Model 3).

(guardian model).

In line with previous research (Ni Raghallaigh, 2013; Ni Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015; Wade et al., 2012), the results of our study showed the importance of the *relationship between child and carers*, as there was an almost one-on-one relationship between the quality of the relationship between child and carer and the success of the placement (from the perspectives of both the child and the carer), which means that one could simply ask about the quality of the relationship between child and carers to determine placement success. Relationships that ‘went beyond hospitality to relationships of family-like intimacy’ (Sirriyeh, 2013, p. 6) were the most successful. These relationships were characterized by harmonious interaction between the children and carers, the sharing of past and current experiences, mutual respect, trust, interest of carers in their foster child, and the ability to discuss difficult subjects, among other elements. Positive characteristics of the children (e.g. being kind, sweet and not causing problems) and carers (e.g. being a good or a nice person, being open-minded) also contributed to good relationships (Rip et al., 2020). Nevertheless, it should be noted that in other studies of unaccompanied refugee children, it was found that they had differing expectations with regard to the degree of attachment and belonging to their foster family (Wade et al., 2012). For example, the anticipation or hope of family reunification might hinder children from forming close bonds with their foster carers. The importance of good relationships for the success of a placement has not only been recognized in research into foster care for unaccompanied refugee children, but also with regard to regular foster care (e.g. Hallas, 2002) and residential care (e.g. Ni Raghallaigh, 2013). As relationships develop over time (Ni Raghallaigh, 2013; Sirriyeh, 2013; Wade et al., 2012), it is important to continue studying placement success longitudinally to determine the extent of their influence.

Contrary to our expectations – as previous research indicated that children were divided on the degree of cultural similarity needed in the foster placement (e.g. Barrie & Mendes, 2011; Hek, 2007), while carers mentioned cultural similarity to be beneficial (Brown, George, et al., 2009) – our regression analyses showed that, predominantly for children, *cultural similarity* between a child and their carers was important for placement success. For both foster carers and guardians, cultural similarity was less related (not significant) to placement success. Because Dutch foster care policy for unaccompanied refugee children favours cultural foster placements (De Ruijter de Wildt et al., 2015), we also expected that cultural similarity would be an important predictor of placement success from the perspective of guardians. This study also reported a relatively low score on the cultural similarity between the children and carers ( $M = 1.64$ , range 0–3), probably as a consequence of the fact that a foster family with a similar cultural background was not always available (Schippers, 2017).

In addition to cultural similarity, a higher score on children’s *prosocial behaviour* (SDQ-self report) was associated with more positive outcomes regarding placement success (child model). Previous research (Stone & Stone, 1983, as cited in Doelling & Johnson, 1990) also found a positive association between prosocial behaviour and placement outcomes, as ‘better socialized children were more likely to remain in their assigned placement’ (pp. 585–586). For foster carers, children’s *externalizing behaviour* (SDQ) was negatively correlated with the success of the placement (foster carer model). In line with our results, Wade et al. (2012) also identified the relationship between emotional well-being and placement success (based on the Family Integration Measure), noting that this was probably a reciprocal relationship: children who were easy to care for were likely to be considered as doing well in their emotional, social and educational development (Wade et al., 2012, p. 185) and, logically, foster carers would rate the placement as more successful.

For guardians, a higher score on the *quality of the caregiving environment* (BIC-G) was associated with placement success (guardian model). This is to be expected, as one of the prime responsibilities of guardians is to ‘advocate for all decisions to be taken in the best interest

of the child, aimed at the protection and development of the child’ (i.e. core standard 1; Goeman & Van Os, 2013, p. 18), and the assessment of the quality of the caregiving environment (using the BIC-Questionnaire; Kalverboer & Zijlstra, 2006; Zijlstra, 2012) is one method of doing so. A high-quality caregiving environment within the foster placement is in the best interest of the child, and therefore our results point towards the quality of the caregiving environment as an important predictor of placement success according to guardians.

Noticeably, a few children reported very low scores on placement success, while their foster carers and guardians were more satisfied with the foster placement. In addition, children reported having more social-emotional problems than were reported by foster carers and guardians about the child. This raises the question of whether foster carers and guardians are always aware of a child’s lack of satisfaction with the placement, or the child having social-emotional problems. Previous research has also reported disagreement between the different perspectives (e.g. Bean, Eurelings-Bontekoe, & Spinhoven, 2007; Doelling & Johnson, 1990; Kramer et al., 2004) and identified three reasons for this: ‘(1) differences in how parents and adolescents interpreted questions; (2) lack of parental awareness of adolescents’ behaviors; and (3) different thresholds for what is considered problematic’ (Kramer et al., 2004, p. 248). Moreover, Kramer et al. (2004) found that the problems only reported by parents were taken more seriously by clinicians than the problems only reported by children. The latter might explain why some children gave low scores, while their carers and guardians were more positive. The outcomes underline the importance of *self-reports* for understanding the child’s experiences.

Children in our sample experienced a similar number of stressful life events to unaccompanied refugee children in the large sample studied by Bean et al. (2004a), although, interestingly, their reactions to these stressful life events were less severe than those in this reference group (Bean, Eurelings-Bontekoe, Broekaert, & Spinhoven, 2007). However, the children in the latter group lived in different forms of care, while the children in our sample all lived in foster care, which might have a positive influence on the child’s mental health, as previous studies have also emphasized (e.g. Bronstein et al., 2012; Zijlstra et al., 2019). Compared to small living groups, small living units or campuses, foster care has been found to provide the highest quality caregiving environment. Children ‘who feel loved and cared for, respected and stimulated in their development seem to have fewer emotional problems’ (Zijlstra et al., 2019, p. 11).

Interestingly, fewer children (41%) and carers (58%) than expected reported integration (i.e. identification and involvement with host country’s culture and the culture of the country of origin; Sam & Berry, 1995, p. 11) as their predominant acculturation strategy. Moreover, the second predominant strategy was separation (i.e. exclusive involvement in the culture of the country of origin and no or little interaction with host country’s culture; Sam & Berry, 1995, p. 11) for both children and carers. This might be explained by the fact that most children were placed in cultural foster families, in which the family members were not born in the host country and who were often refugees themselves. It is possible that they were ‘too preoccupied with establishing themselves in the host country’ (Linowitz & Boothby, 1988, p. 194) to the detriment of greater involvement in the host country. Another explanation might be that only obtaining a residence permit starts the process of integration for unaccompanied refugee children (Schippers, 2017), and several children in our study had not, or not yet, obtained a residence permit.

### 5.1. Strengths and limitations

This study is the first in the Netherlands to explore the impact of cultural similarity between unaccompanied refugee children and carers on a larger scale – including other child and fostering factors – on placement success. The use of multiple informants helped us to better understand the factors associated with placement success from the

perspectives of the children, their carers and their guardians. Our previous study (Rip et al., 2020) assisted in the development of this longitudinal study, and also gave us the opportunity to improve the instruments and procedure used in the current study. For example, scaling questions were replaced by reported scores and we added emoticons (Due, Riggs, & Augoustinos, 2014) to the answer categories of most questionnaires to better indicate the intention of the answer (the use of smiley faces especially helped in the interpretation of double negatives). Moreover, by providing participants with the option to use telephone interpreters, as well as to complete the questionnaires in Dutch, English, Arabic or Tigrinya, we overcame some of the language barriers (Wade et al., 2012, p. 72).

The relatively high scores on placement success, predominantly by children and carers, might suggest that the participants gave socially desirable answers. Children might give confirmatory or socially desirable answers because they want to please adults (Zeinstra, Koelen, Colindres, Kok, & De Graaf, 2009) and this tendency might have been further influenced by the cultural backgrounds of the participants (Ross & Mirowsky, 1984), as 'honesty in interactions with strangers is a characteristic that is more highly valued in individualist societies, while concern about maintaining good relationships and face-saving are more salient (and hence, socially desirable) in collectivist countries' (i.e. countries where most of our participants came from) (Triandis, 1995, as cited in Johnson & Van de Vijver, 2003, p. 197). However, if our participants had provided socially desirable answers for this questionnaire, it would be expected they would have done so for the other questionnaires, which to our knowledge did not occur.

One limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size, which has consequences for the power of the study. We partly overcame this problem by taking 10% as the significance level. Moreover, as the guardians acted as gatekeepers and decided that several children were too vulnerable to participate, there might be some bias in the results, with the sample not fully reflecting the population of unaccompanied refugee children with regard to vulnerability.

Furthermore, the cultural instruments (i.e. cultural similarity score; AHIMSA) used in this study focused on 'surface-level constructs of culture' (Toro & Nieri, 2018, p. 8). Although quite similar to the measurement of cultural similarity in previous quantitative research (e.g. Anderson & Linares, 2012), the cultural similarity score is arbitrary, and in no way covers the 'rich complex of meanings, beliefs, practices, symbols, norms and values prevalent among people in society' that defines culture (Schwartz, 2004, p. 43). Nevertheless, as there is no large scale research on this topic, the current study does contribute to our knowledge of the impact of cultural matching factors on placement success and might shape future research that further disentangles the complex phenomenon of cultural similarity.

## 5.2. Implications for research, policy and practice

Future research could benefit from a larger sample. Moreover, it is important to gain better insight into the discrepancies between the perspectives of children, foster carers and guardians with regard to the potential factors that predict successful foster placements, and to determine whether these discrepancies are related to a placement breakdown during the second measurement of the longitudinal study – as might be expected from the research by Strijker (2014). Finally, longitudinal research will provide insight into whether the predictors of placement success remain stable over time.

This study emphasized the importance of the relationship between children and carers for placement success. Therefore, professional

support or interventions provided by the foster care agency should focus on keeping intact or even improving the relationship between child and carer (Sinclair & Wilson, 2003). However, in previous research, foster carers did not regard this type of support as the most helpful for children in care (Wade et al., 2012). 'Helping young people to settle into family life and build relationships of trust and respect' was predominantly viewed as a role for carers not for social workers (Wade et al., 2012, p. 261).

Furthermore, the results of this study confirm the current Dutch practice of placing children in families that are connected to or have a close understanding of the child's cultural background, although predominantly from the perspective of the children. Foster care agencies must ensure that a sufficient number of culturally matched foster families are available (O'Higgins, Ott, & Shea, 2018).

## 5.3. Conclusion

As placement in foster care is seen as the most preferred option for unaccompanied refugee children, it is important to know what factors are associated with foster placement success for this specific group of children. The explorative results show, next to 'cultural similarity between child and foster carers' which was included in all prediction models, some interesting differences between the perspectives of children, foster carers and guardians with regard to factors that predict the most successful placements – being the presence of 'prosocial behaviour', the absence of 'externalizing behaviour', and the presence of a 'good caregiving environment', respectively.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Jet Rip:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing, Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration. **Elianne Zijlstra:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition. **Wendy Post:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - review & editing, Formal analysis, Supervision, Funding acquisition. **Margrite Kalverboer:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition. **Erik J. Knorth:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - review & editing, Supervision.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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**Appendix A. Histograms of placement success for unaccompanied refugee children, foster carers and guardians**

See Figs. 1.1–1.3.

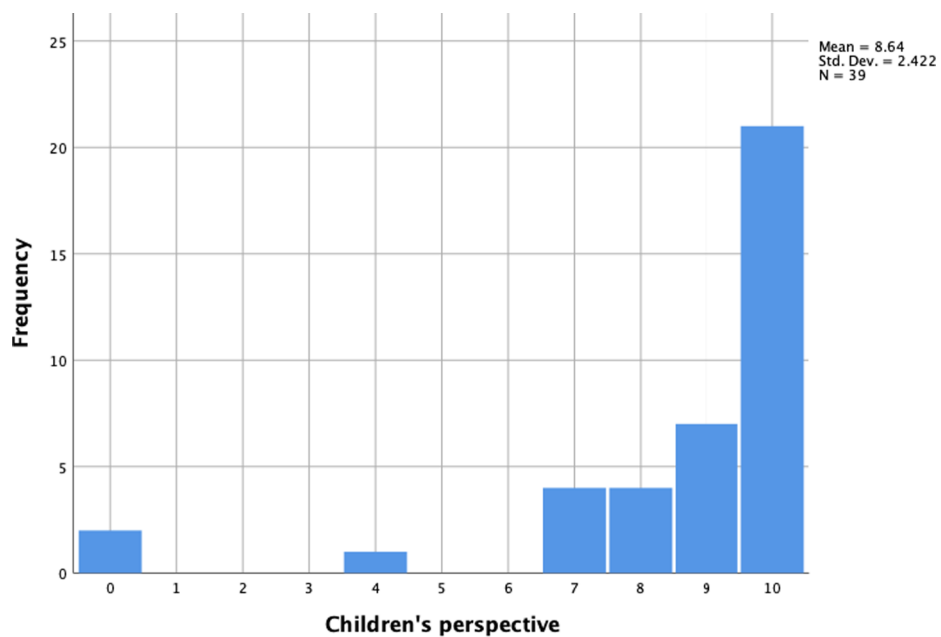


Fig. 1.1. Histogram of placement success from children's perspective.

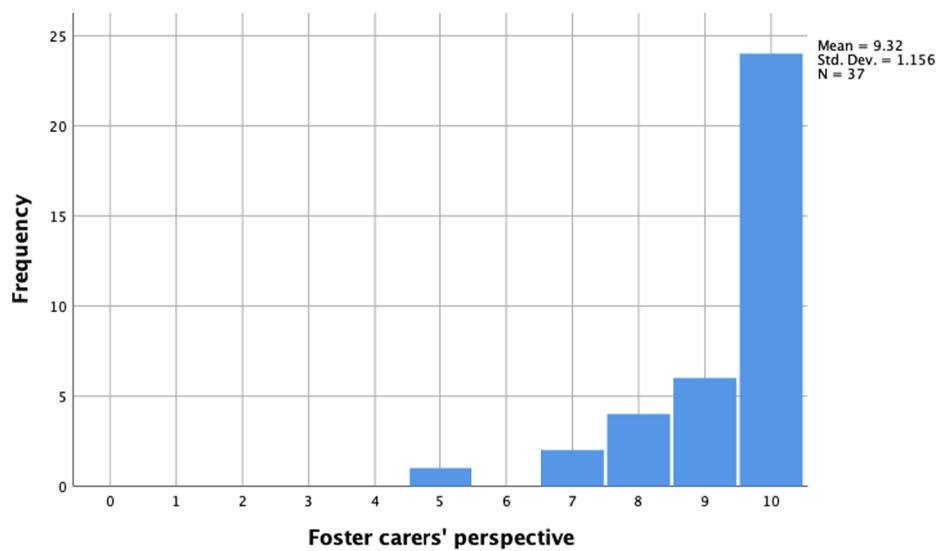


Fig. 1.2. Histogram of placement success from foster carers' perspective.



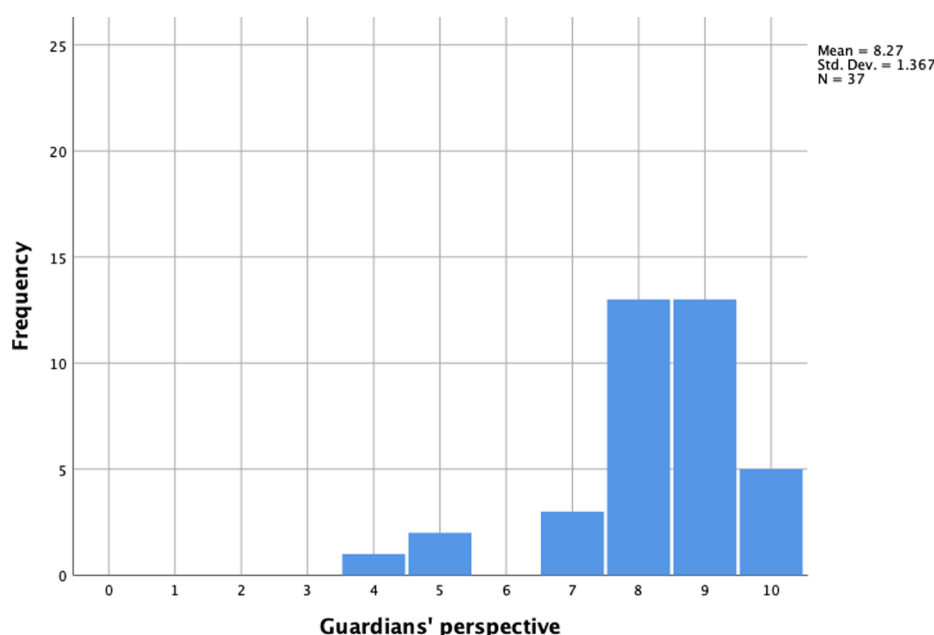


Fig. 1.3. Histogram of placement success from guardians' perspective.

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